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Judy Webster
University of Tennessee

Barry Fast
Academic Book Centers

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Issues in Vendor-Library Relations

Outsourcing

Column Editors: **Judy Webster** (University of Tennessee) and
Barry Fast (Academic Book Center)

Outsourcing and PromptCat

by **Barry Fast**
(Academic Book Center)

At the 1994 Charleston Conference one of the sessions was devoted to contracting with outside vendors to provide fully cataloged shelf-ready books. As libraries strive for greater efficiency, they are increasingly exploring vendor-provided services that may replace most of the work traditionally done in cataloging departments. Despite the awkwardness of the word, outsourcing has become the current buzzword in library management.

Why can't libraries increase their own productivity without having to use outside contractors in technical services? How do outside vendors save money for libraries, yet still make a profit on the cataloging services they provide? The Charleston session addressed each of these questions and provided some answers.

To answer the first question we need to examine the different cultures of libraries and for-profit businesses. Libraries have a culture that derives from their mission to provide information to users, whether that information is provided free of charge or, in recent years, at some nominal charge for certain kinds of information. In either case, the library is devoted to service for its own sake. No one would argue that the concept of li-

braries embodies one of the great humanitarian undertakings of our civilization. It is not grandiose to describe the mission of libraries in the most selfless and enlightened terms. When that overarching mission is translated into the everyday workplace, a kind of institutionalized cognitive dissonance takes place. On the one hand, the goal is to help people get the information they need; on the other hand, the constraints of real life, the pressures of tight budgets within the context of the exponential growth of information, force library administrators to think and act increasingly like business managers.

In practical terms, managing a cataloging department where the primary goal is productivity becomes very difficult. Not only does the culture of the library omit productivity as a central goal, but often some of the same people are asked to perform production-oriented work for part of their day (cataloging) and then switch to another position where productivity is far less important (reference services, for instance, or book selection).

As reported at Charleston, the **University of Alberta** and one of its book dealers, **Coutts**, cooperated on a pilot project to provide fully cataloged, nearly shelf ready books. It was estimated that savings of 30% to 40% could be achieved. The savings did not come from the vendor operating a sweatshop, but rather resulted from the different profit-oriented culture of a business. By dedicating a team to good quality, high productivity cataloging, with management focused entirely on making this a profit center, an outside vendor can catalog books at significantly lower cost than an in-house operation. Outsourcing some cataloging functions makes as much sense as outsourcing payroll services to companies dedicated to that task. They do it cheaper

than an in-house payroll department, and management does not have to concern itself with functions that are peripheral to the main operation of the company.

At the ALA midwinter meeting in Philadelphia, **OCLC** introduced their new **PromptCat** service. This is a further advance in the libraries' quest for efficiency, a quest that does not divert management from the library's primary goal of service. Working with four initial vendors (**Academic Book Center**, **Baker & Taylor**, **Blackwell North America**, **Yankee Book Peddler** and more vendors to be added in the near future), **OCLC** creates a match between titles in its database with those in the vendors' databases. When the vendor sends books to a library it sends an electronic "manifest" of these titles to **OCLC**. The cataloging records are then sent to the library and holdings updated, all without any additional keying. In a test at **Michigan State University**, books sent on their Yankee approval plan were cataloged at a rate of 12 per hour as opposed to 3.5 per hour prior to the test. These kinds of productivity gains, if they can be replicated in the wider library community, promise dramatic cost savings for most cataloging functions. There are, as one would expect, some problems still to be solved. For approval plans, the frequency of CIP records is quite high, perhaps 60%, which means that collation and other updates to the CIP record need to be done. **OCLC**, the participating vendors, and librarians are working on solving this and other problems. **PromptCat** looks like it will be a very useful service for libraries that are intent upon reducing operating costs. There is nothing on the horizon that would lead any of us to believe that library budgets, for both materials and operations, will increase significantly in the years ahead. The challenge for library managers lies in controlling costs without changing the mission of libraries. Working cooperatively with vendors to identify areas where their services can help accomplish this difficult goal may hold the key to succeeding. ☛

